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JOE MAXWELL, WITH HEATHER JOHNSON AND JOHN GEARY IN ANAHEIM

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OBITUARY

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Wimber had already recovered from cancer in 1993 and a stroke in 1995 (CT, Oct. 7, 1996, p. 49). Last year he underwent triple-bypass heart surgery.

At a November 21 memorial service, an overflow crowd spilled out of the Anaheim (Calif.) Vineyard Christian Fellowship (VCF)'s 3,200 seats and into the aisles and outer rooms where big-screen monitors were stationed. In a fashion Wimber surely would have appreciated, the church he founded worshiped to the accompaniment of electric guitars, keyboards, and the soft beat of drums. Wimber had recently retired as pastor of the church (CT, July 14, 1997, p. 46).

Wimber graduated from Azusa Pacific University in 1970 and pastored the Yorba Linda Friends Church for five years. In 1974, Wimber began breaking traditional evangelical molds when he became director of church growth at the Fuller Evangelistic Association. He later taught a controversial and well-attended "Signs and Wonders and Church Growth" class at Fuller Theological Seminary. In 1978 he became full-time pastor of what became VCF in Yorba Linda, California.

ENORMOUS IMPACT: From that congregation, the Vineyard movement now has grown to nearly 500 churches nationwide and another 250 internationally.

Today, thousands of traditional evangelical churches each Sunday sing Vineyard-produced songs, and Wimber's effective marketing has offered many Protestant denominations and individuals a non-threatening way of charismatic expression.

"The Vineyard has exercised influence all out of proportion to its numbers," Regent University divinity school dean Vinson Synan told CT: "I trace that to Wimber himself. The greatest asset Vineyard had was Wimber, just like Wesley was the greatest asset to the Methodists."

Wimber's Vineyard did not escape controversy. "The Vineyard sometimes let outside influences exercise undue influences within it," Synan says.

Eventually, after embracing the controversial Kansas City prophets, Wimber provided correction to their movement, which broke from the Vineyard in 1996 (CT, Oct. 7, 1996, p. 86). In similar fashion, John Arnott's Toronto Vineyard, home of the Toronto Blessing phenomenon, broke away from the Vineyard in 1995. Wimber had cautioned them not to encourage so-called exotic manifestations, including animal noises (CT, Jan. 8, 1996, p. 66).

Lasting legacy: Wimber had a big impact on the American church.

"John was always on the cutting edge, so naturally he was at a point where there would be differences of opinion as to what he was doing," says Fuller Seminary professor C. Peter Wagner. "But now that he is gone he leaves a legacy not of criticism, but a legacy of positive contribution to the kingdom of God."

Todd Hunter, acting national director of the Association of Vineyard Churches, USA, recalled during the memorial service that Wimber was "always willing to selflessly take whatever heat came his way."

Bob Fulton, international coordinator of the Vineyard International Consortium and Wimber's brother-in-law, remembered his 33 years with Wimber. "When John was wrong, he would repent," Fulton said.

Acting director: Hunter.

SEARCH FOR IDENTITY: The Vineyard now faces a future without its founding leader. Hunter said Vineyard leaders are more certain how the transition will unfold within the United States than internationally.

"What's next is for the Vineyard in the States to affirm or ratify the national director, to set a course for post-Wimber Vineyard—how we will govern ourselves without his autocratic—and I mean that in the neutral sense of the term—without his autocratic leadership," Hunter told CT. "How can we become more participatory without getting stuck in the mud?"

Before his death, Wimber installed a board of six regional overseers, which included national leaders Hunter and Fulton. There is also a council of district overseers and a leadership team, including area coordinators and task force leaders.

Many observers say the 40-year-old Hunter, who holds a master's degree in biblical studies from Regent University, is Wimber's likely successor as the Vineyard's top leader. Regent University professor of theology J. Rodman Williams says Hunter is highly capable. "He's a well-balanced young man."

Internationally, more questions exist. "We've raised up other countries, and when they got to a certain size we let them become their own independent Association of Vineyard Churches, which was working as long as John was alive because he was the umbrella man," Hunter says. "How are America and those other countries going to relate? We've said philosophically that we don't want America dominating and leading the whole world."

Synan believes the movement is "struggling to define its future, theologically and every way—whether they would be more of a straightline evangelical church or more of a charismatic and Pentecostal influence."

Wimber's books, including *Power Evangelism*, *Power Healing*, *Power Points*, *Power Encounters*, and *The Way to Maturity*, along with the Vineyard's growing contemporary music legacy, will continue to be consulted long after his death.

"John Wimber is one of those rare persons who has been the molder of a generation," Wagner says. "The contribution he has made has actually turned the rudder of Christianity and moved it in the direction the Holy Spirit wants it to go in the twenty-first century."

By Joe Maxwell, with Heather Johnson and John Geary in Anaheim.

TECHNOLOGY

IRS Spurs Nonprofit Disclosure on Internet

If Christians want to know how much money their favorite ministry took in last year, or how much its top officers make, current federal law does not make it easy for them.

The law only requires that charities show copies of their informational tax return, called Form 990, to those who ask in person. Charities do not even have to provide photocopies.

New IRS regulations, however, will change all that. Anyone else with an interest in a nonprofit organization's finances will soon be able to obtain Form 990 information with little effort. Under the new rules, organizations will have to send out copies of the forms within 30 days of receiving a written request, even if the request comes via e-mail.

INTERNET ACCESS: In addition, the Internal Revenue Service hopes that organizations will make it even easier to procure Form 990 information by offering it on the Internet.

"Regulators are pushing to get 990s up on the Internet because they want as much public accountability as possible," says Paul D. Nelson, president of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA).

But, says Nelson, it may be a while before Internet users can find all the information they want. "Most organizations will go the mail way to begin with," he says, "and even down the road some may still say they don't want to volunteer that kind of information without being asked first."

He guesses that controversial organizations, especially those with public-policy agendas, will be more likely to wait until being asked before providing the tax information.

Bill Bowers, chief operations officer of Didax Corporation, a company that provides online technical support for several Christian organizations, including Promise Keepers, World Vision, and Christianity Today, Inc., says he does not know of any Christian organization offering the financial information on their own Web sites. "But it seems to be a great, cheap way to get information to donors," he says.

Form 990 information for many nonprofit organizations is already on the Internet's World Wide Web. Most often, such information can be found at larger Web sites devoted to monitoring the nonprofit sector, such as GuideStar: The Donor's Guide to the Nonprofit Universe (http://www.guidestar.org) or the Minnesota Attorney General's Charities site (http://www.ag.state.mn.us/consumer/charities). These sites typically get the Form 990 information from the IRS directly.

Star site: GuideStar provides some tax information for nonprofit organizations, but it can be outdated or incomplete.

SAVING TIME, MONEY: Under new IRS rules, if an organization posts its Form 990 information on the Internet, the organization does not have to send it to those who make a mail request. This new method can potentially save time and money, though organizations are allowed to charge reasonable photocopying fees for mailed requests ($1 for the first page, 15 cents for each additional page, the same rates used by the IRS).

ECFA president: Nelson.

The IRS estimates that only about 1,000 of more than one million tax-exempt groups will make their Form 990s available on the Internet. Nelson says he does not know of any ECFA member organizations offering Form 990 information on their own Web sites.

"We don't have our 990 on the Internet and we aren't planning to," says Chuck McGinty, field communications director for Compassion International. "We do, though, have our financial statement on the Web."

For the few people who ask, a Form 990 is mailed, but most simply want to see a pie chart of how ministry expenses are subdivided, McGinty says.

Nonprofit watchdog groups, major donors, journalists, academic researchers, and ministry employees have strong interest in easy access to Form 990 information for analysis and comparison. Since the IRS each year audits relatively few nonprofits, public disclosure enhances the ability of an independent outsider to question how a ministry expends funds.

The Form 990 does not even have to be on the organization's own Web site. As long as it is accessible from the organization's site, it can be stored at another address used as a database of documents for similar organizations.

ECFA has no plans to offer such a database, but it has considered "crossposting" member information. For example, a member organization could show the ECFA logo with a hyperlink to the ECFA Web site to show they are in good standing with the council. Conversely, ECFA could have a list of links to member organizations.

"But right now, our front burner is compliance with the new guidelines," Nelson says. "ECFA is simply trying to make organizations aware of the law."

FOLLING FOES: The new guidelines also allow exemptions from the photocopying requirement if an organization can prove requests for the copies are part of a harassment campaign aimed at making the organization do extra work.

"In the public-policy area, especially organizations involved in the abortion and gay-rights debates, there have been concerted efforts to disrupt business," Nelson says.

Even in such cases, the organizations must always provide copies to journalists, hostile or not, with no apparent ties to the harassment campaigns.

An organization cannot deny requests for photocopies due to an increase in requests from the public after a national news story about the organization, such as the Federal Election Commission's complaint against the Christian Coalition in 1996.

The new regulations will go into effect 60 days after the IRS issues final rules on enforcing the law, which are expected shortly after a February hearing. Nonprofits that do not comply may be fined up to $10,000. Nelson greatly approves of the regulations, saying, "This is a significant act for donors simply because it's one more way to get them the information they need."

By Ted Olsen.

CHRISTIANITY TODAY
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SHARE

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